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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a technique for giving ESL (English as a second language) students with rather limited English ability an opportunity to talk on a regular basis. The technique takes into consideration: (1) the time limitations of the classroom; (2) the tendency of some students to dominate discussion and the need for giving others opportunities to talk without pressure; (3) teacher preparation time; (4) the teacher's need to "keep things going" in class discussion; and (5) usability as a regular part of class activities. The technique makes use of the language-experience approach, and with student-generated questions allows the class, in a sense, to do the teacher's preparation. It is highly productive in extracting the maximum amount of English that the student knows in both a formal and grammatical as well as an informal and communicative way, on a meaningful level. The four steps involved in the technique include: eliciting questions; small groups or pairs of students asking and answering questions; writing only the answers in a paragraph, like a story; and formal reading or speaking of corrected papers by students. The total time for these steps is 50 minutes or longer. The details of conducting these four steps and further suggestions are presented. (EJS)

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TOWARDS INDEPENDENT ORAL AND WRITTEN PERFORMANCE

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Giving ESL students with rather limited English an opportunity to talk on a regular basis can be a frustrating dilemma for both teachers and students. Several problems beset the teacher when desiring to add conversation to class activities. What can everyone talk about? In a one-hour class with thirty students how can everyone get enough time to talk at any length? How does the teacher deal with the potential of frustration and fatigue on the part of both students and teacher brought about by an hour's discussion? What can be done about the fact that some students dominate a conversation session and some students cannot or will not talk under pressure? What meaningful things can the class talk about? The technique described in this paper takes the following things into consideration: 1) the time limitations of the classroom; 2) the tendency of some students to dominate discussion and the need for giving the others opportunities to talk without pressure; 3) teacher preparation time; 4) the teacher's need to "keep things going" in class discussion; and 5) usability as a regular part of class activities. This technique makes use of the language-experience approach, and with student-generated questions allows the class, in a sense, to do the teacher's preparation. Because of these characteristics it is highly productive in extracting, in both a formal and grammatical as well as an informal and communicative way, the maximum amount of English that the student knows, on a meaningful level.

When an ESL classroom is filled with the energy of students talking in English it can be a very exciting time for everyone. The problem lies in eliminating frustration and fatigue on the part of the teacher and students and maximizing the time for productive conversation.

The technique below is a simple, straightforward and natural way to bring regular conversation into the classroom. It requires almost no teacher preparation. The students structure the direction under the teachers' guidance, and this consequently becomes an effective way to expand the students' linguistic abilities at a meaningful level.

TEACHER PREPARATION:

Choose a topic, either from your ideas or from the list of topics I have used and enclosed in this paper. Put the topic on the board. Number down the board about 1 to 10. To the left of the numbers write at 45° angles up and down five or six basic-question words: "what", "who", "why", "where", "when", "how", "how many", etc. You don't have to write too many--just enough to encourage them to think of questions using these question words. The board should look like this when you start:

HOW MANY	WHO	1.	My House
		2.	
		3.	
WHERE	WHEN	4.	
HOW	WHAT	5.	
		6.	

A slightly different version of this paper was presented at the CATESOL State Conference in San Diego, March, 1977.

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STEP 1:

Give a vocabulary explanation that may be needed on the topic (e.g. on the topic "A Special Holiday In My Country," what does "special mean?").

Ask this question of the class: "What (kinds of) questions can you think of about this topic?"

When you feel they understand your directions, stand at the board and BE QUIET. Wait and wait and wait. They are thinking. If you talk, it will interrupt their thinking. You are the only person who hears the silence. Let them think.

It may take 30 seconds or so, or a repeating of directions, but the questions will start. Trust it to happen. Your only job here is to make sure that the questions are relevant to the topic and that they are grammatically correct. Ultimately they will be writing a full description like a story and then giving it as a speech. A strong set of questions will produce a more interesting set of answers. For example: on the topic "My House" the question "Is your house green?" is weak. "What color is your house?" is strong. "Do you like the kitchen?" is weak. "What room do you like?" is strong, since the answers lend themselves more to the flow of a paragraph.

Teacher's role during question asking:

You write the questions on the board. When a grammatical mistake occurs in the student's question write the question and draw a line where the student needs to reconsider. For example:

Student: "Why you like your car?"

Teacher writes: "Why _____ you like your car?"

While you are writing the class sees the blank and is thinking about what goes there. By the time you have finished either that student or another has the answer. In our experience, most of the grammatical mistakes in these questions have been the misuse or the omission of the auxiliary.

Feel free to strengthen questions by adding WH words to yes-no questions or by putting a question of your own at the end that you feel will add an interesting answer. But in general let the students do the bulk of the questions because then the questions that they ask will be at the grammatical and meaning level of the students. Also, if two or three students ask most of the questions, this is all right. Like an older sibling teaching a younger sibling, a weaker student can sometimes learn more from a stronger student than he can from the teacher.

STEP 2: SMALL GROUPS OR PAIRING:

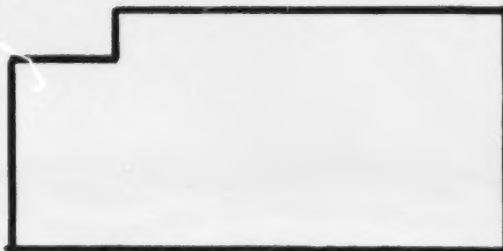
Now you tell them to talk with another person (who does not speak their language). One person asks these questions and the other person answers them from his/her personal experience. When he/she is finished asking then the second person asks the first the same questions and the first person answers. Tell students to raise their hands if they have a problem or want some help. Now get out of the way! (one teacher who has tried this technique said that at this point all teaching stopped and learning began!) Don't disturb the pairs or groups. Sit down at your desk and listen to the energy. They need this time to relax and talk without the pressure of talking in front of the teacher or the entire class. It is

not important whether or not their English is correct--only that they are communicating. You know that at least half of the talking is correct if the person asking the questions is reading from the board correctly. Remember that only half of your goal is correct English. The other half is simply communicating in English. Time--15 to 20 minutes. Monitor the level of activity with the intention of arriving at a natural stopping point approximately at the end of this time limit.

STEP 3: WRITING:

When the students have finished asking and answering the questions (about 20 minutes) tell them to take a piece of paper and write only the answers (NOT the questions) in a paragraph, like a story. Don't let them number their answers.

In a sense this is the culminating exercise for most of the students. If they don't know the form a paragraph takes, then it is worth taking a few minutes to show them. Have the students draw the following diagram on their papers about the size of half a sheet of paper:



When they are finished you can correct their papers, determine what kinds of errors they are making and reinforce these with grammar exercises some other day. There are enough topics which tend to elicit questions in one tense or another that you can focus their attention during several sessions on correct usage of a particular tense. Talking and writing about their individual experiences in life is really the ultimate test of whether or not they are learning the grammar at the "usage" level. Time: 15 to 20 minutes. The completion of these 3 steps takes about 50 minutes of class time.

STEP 4: FORMAL SPEAKING: (Optional)

Selected papers (corrected) can be chosen for the students to read to the rest of the class. Correct the papers, and ask the students if they want to share their experiences with the rest of the class. Point out that they should practice for a few minutes, especially the corrections. Some students will memorize their papers and some will read them. Some will not want to share. Time: 15 to 20 minutes, depending on how many students share. Total time for all four steps is about one-and-a-half hours.

WHAT IS BEING LEARNED?

1. Question asking
2. Organization of ideas
3. Use of maximum amount of English that student knows
4. Confidence in ability to communicate in English at a meaningful level

5. How to talk about experiences formerly expressed only in first language
6. Pairing or grouping across ethnic lines teaches cross-cultural understanding

SUGGESTIONS:

In the question-asking phase don't necessarily feel obliged to put the first question asked by a student under number 1. For example, in "A Special Holiday in Your Country", the first question was "Why is this a special holiday?" I put this about number 3 or 4, having beforehand at least some idea of what should be talked about first. Eventually most or all of the questions I expect are asked. If not, they can be added at the end of the time. Don't accept irrelevant questions. For example, on this same topic a student asked, "How many holidays do you have in your country?" As teacher it is your job to remind the student that the class is only going to talk about one special holiday. If a student asks a question already on the board a different way I point to that question and ask the student if his question is the same as the one already asked, or if it is different. Duplicating the idea of the question doesn't add to the strength of the answers.

Be sure the questions use "you" and "your" and not "I" and "my", even though the topic is about "My House" or "My Family". The topics use "My" because the questions and the talking are not only ends in themselves but also part of the process towards independent writing which will use "I" and "My". But the talking is between two or more people and would naturally be seeking information from "you" not "me".

Selling the Passive Student on Talking:

Some students just don't enjoy talking to anyone but the teacher. (Of course, no matter whether you are doing a reading or a structural exercise you can never get 100% participation.) Sometimes a student will be more willing to participate if you tell him that the talking will make his writing better. It is true, even at the lowest level, that students feel more immediately ready to write about something after they have talked about it.

An Unexpected Benefit:

In deciding how often to use this technique, I considered that the students might not want to do it too often, so last year I did it about once a week. I sometimes tried topics that fit the grammar we were doing or I just chose a topic because of its ability to bring into conversation and writing all the English at the students' disposal. A substitute teacher once remarked that she had never seen such a "together" class. Communicating together about these topics had brought the class closer together.

This year I am team-teaching with a teacher who concentrates on grammar, reading, and exercises one hour, while I teach speaking, writing, and listening another hour. I have been using this technique about two to four times a week. The rapport and positive feeling among the students builds because of the frequency of their getting together, and this is an important ingredient in their comfort in the class and consequently enhances their ability to focus on learning.

- STEP I - Elicit Questions - 15 to 20 minutes
 - STEP II - Small groups or pairs asking and answering questions - 15 to 20 minutes
 - STEP III - Write only the answers in a paragraph, like a story - 10 to 15 minutes
 - STEP IV - (optional) - Formal reading or speaking of corrected papers by students - 10 to 30 minutes
- TOTAL TIME: at least 50 minutes or longer

This presentation is being video-taped as part of Palomar's 309 Project. It will be video-taped in the classroom with my students. I would welcome and encourage any reactions to what happens when you use the technique in your class. Try it, and write to me of any suggestions, additions, reactions, etc. that you may have.

TOPICSComments

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Eating ----- | Present tense |
| 2. Who Are You? ----- | Good for first day of class |
| 3. My House ----- | Present tense |
| 4. My Car ----- | |
| 5. Who Is It? ----- | Describing someone in the room |
| 6. Shopping for Food ----- | Present tense |
| 7. My Family ----- | Present tense |
| 8. Autobiography ----- | Present tense |
| 9. A Special Holiday In Your Country ----- | Present tense |
| 10. My Best Friend | |
| 11. My Earliest Memories ----- | Past tense |
| 12. My First Month in the United States ----- | Past tense |
| 13. A Person I Will Never Forget ----- | |
| 14. A Place in My Country That You
Should See (for tourists) ----- | Present tense |
| 15. Next Year ----- | Future tense (teach "probably")
" " "will" |
| 16. Next Week-End ----- | Future tense (going to) |
| 17. Coming to the United States ----- | Past tense |
| 18. My Childhood ----- | Past tense |
| 19. The Day I Got Hurt ----- | Past tense |
| 20. This Morning ----- | Past tense |
| 21. Yesterday ----- | Past tense |
| 22. Last Week-End ----- | Past tense |
| 23. Movies | |